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Inviting Children to the Table

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Many Christian traditions are exploring ways to strengthen children's faith development through participation in the Lord's Supper. This session, led by members of the Christian Reformed Faith Formation Committee, will explore their approaches and will provide guidance and resources for congregational leaders who seek to have the sacraments be made more richly nourishing to young and old.

Goal: to sow a vision for congregational faith formation, place the matter of children at the table within that vision, and then provide guidelines for welcoming children to the table within that vision as well.

Method: a blend of plenary teaching, plenary discussion, small group discussion, congregational work (either alone or with members from one's own congregation if others are present).

Outcomes – each participant will:

1. name the faith formation strengths of his/her congregation, celebrate these and commit to maintaining and strengthening them.
2. strengthen his/her vision of congregational faith formation, and understand how the various faith formation activities present in the congregation flow from and embody that vision.
3. understand how the sacraments, along with faith milestones (particularly profession of faith), flow from that faith formation vision and have ideas for strengthening that connection.
4. respect the roles of all faith formation stakeholders (congregation, council, parents, children/teens, ministry staff, etc.) and wise processes for suggesting and implementing new strategies to various stakeholders.
5. have a tentative plan for strengthening faith formation practices in general and communion practices in particular.

Outline:

- A. A biblical vision of congregational faith formation.
- B. Recent developments in the Christian Reformed Church concerning communion practice.
- C. Strengthening the links between congregational faith formation and sacramental practices.

A BIBLICAL VISION FOR CONGREGATIONAL FAITH FORMATION p.2

A vision: congregations are places where God is present, growing his children of all ages into a mature body with Christ as its head, to be salt, light, and yeast to bless his broken world.

A faith formation glossary

The faith formation “grace-ecosystem”: the entire environment of congregational life within which members are disciplined and serve. This environment embodies a particular “spirit” or “ethos” which expresses both the grace and the sin present in the community. For example, a congregation might be described as being “warm and inviting initially, but it’s hard, patient work to truly feel ‘at home’ there.”

Sub-ecosystems: various groups within the overall ecosystem: families, small groups, children and youth groups, council, etc.

Inter-generational: congregations are places comprised of all ages; folks at every stage of life share blessings with all other stages, and need the blessings of all ages. Because our culture is very “generationalized,” sharing these intergenerational blessings requires intentional leadership.

Assumptions about faith formation: faith formation is very difficult to describe, because (a) it is a mystery beyond our control, and (b) it is holistic, involving every dimension of our personal and communal life. Congregations adopt assumptions about faith formation, usually without articulating what they are. Naming these assumptions is important so that a body can grow beyond them.

Spiritual disciplines: learned activities in which we intentionally (i.e. committedly) and repeatedly engage to invite the Spirit’s work of dying and rising with Jesus in us, both personally and communally.

The personal/communal spiritual disciplines fabric: our lives are embedded within a large fabric of disciplines (as well as deformative activities) which shape our growth in Christ. These disciplines support our walk with God, our walk with each other, our service, our obedience. Examples: prayer, Scripture reading, worship, tithing, cultivating spiritually nourishing relationships, sharing stories of faith, growing our capacity for rich conversations, repentance, seeking and embodying social justice, and many more.

Mission: participating in God’s work of reconciling all things to himself, which includes the maturation of those who have surrendered to him, the coming to an “owned” faith of children/teens/young adults in the church, and the invitation to faith of folks in the community.

What are some words or phrases that describe the ethos or spirit that lives in your congregation?

In what ways is faith formation intergenerational?

In what contexts are stories of faith told and invited to be shared?

What role does prayer play in congregational life? In what ways does a spirit of prayerfulness surround the congregation?

In what ways is the congregation missional?

In what ways does the body see faith formation as “lifelong,” and in what ways does it adopt the “graduation syndrome,” e.g. after high school one graduates from formation?

How do folks at different stages of life (children, teens, young adults, the middle-aged, grandparents, the very elderly) find their place in this community?

How would you describe the vision for maturing faith that lives in this body?

The Lord's Supper is a gracious gift of God that sustains and nourishes our faith. To honour this truth, the CRCNA has adopted this principle:

“All baptized members are welcome to the Lord's Supper for age- and ability- appropriate obedience to biblical commands about participation, under the supervision of the elders. The elders have responsibility to nurture grateful and obedient participation by providing encouragement, instruction, and accountability in the congregation. Requiring a formal public profession of faith prior to participation the Lord's Supper is one pastoral approach to consider, but is not required by scripture or the confessions.”

This approach comes out of the following convictions:

1. All baptized persons, regardless of age, are members of the church. Church membership comes not upon profession of faith, but upon baptism.
2. We are invited to the table out of sheer grace as members of God's covenant people, and not because of our profession of faith or our level of comprehension.
3. When we are invited, each participant is called to age- and ability-appropriate obedience of biblical commands about participation at the Lord's Supper.
4. We must learn to see the commands about participation in the Lord's Supper as life-giving gifts, not onerous burdens.
5. I Corinthians 11:17-34, is especially significant for understanding faithful participation in the Lord's Supper, inhospitality and calls for greater unity in the body of Christ. The text is not primarily concerned about children's participation, but rather focuses on unrepentant or inhospitable adults. At the same time, the text has implications for all participants at the table.
6. The elders of a congregation have responsibility for cultivating both the gracious invitation to the table and obedient participation at the table.
7. At times, discussions about the Lord's Supper have slipped into one of two opposing errors: a) focusing too much on achieving a level of cognitive understanding prior to participation, and b) minimizing the importance of theological reflection and learning about deeper participation. Calling for “age- and ability- appropriate participation” addresses both problems at once, resisting the idea that children need to arrive at a certain level of comprehension before partaking and resisting the kind of unthinking participation that can set in over time for any worshiper.
8. Requiring a public profession of faith before participation in the Lord's Supper is a wise pastoral practice in some circumstances, but it is not a biblically mandated nor confessionally required practice. Each church council should promote age- and ability-appropriate obedience at the table, as described in the Bible and in the Reformed confessions, and may choose to require public profession of faith if appropriate.
9. This approach commends common criteria and a complementary set of practices for welcoming children to the table. The common principle and common criteria proposed below promise to help us resist congregationalism, even though our practices may vary according to culture and ministry context.

FAITH FORMATION AND CONGREGATIONAL PRACTICE p. 5

Congregational life involves a multi-layered web of regular practices that invite faith formation.

Baptism: a one-time sacrament in which God declares that the baptized one belongs to him. In baptism, one is crucified with Christ, buried with him and raised with him. An identity is declared, and the call to live out this identity is issued.

Questions: How are parents prepared to live out their baptismal vows? How is the congregation given tools to carry out its congregational vow? How is the baptized one reminded of his/her baptismal identity and calling? How is the community reminded of its identity and calling as a baptized community? How is the RSVP implicit in baptism articulated?

Sunday worship: the regular gathering of God's people in his presence to sing, pray, hear the Word, receive his blessing, give offerings.

Questions: How is the community led to mature into the complex web of spiritual disciplines that are involved in communal worship? In what ways is the worship intergenerational? How does the worship explicitly link with the 24/7 lifestyle of worship the community is called to? In what ways does the worship intentionally cultivate faith formation?

Milestones: liturgical acts demarcating significant moments in the life of a believer or the life of a community. Baptism and profession of faith are milestones. Others: graduations, first communion, retirements, completing one stream of Sunday School, church anniversaries, more. Milestones provide opportunities to (re)affirm commitments, celebrate special markers in life, remember God's faithfulness.

Questions: Which milestones are acknowledged in our community? Which milestones might we be overlooking? How might these be incorporated liturgically in ways that overflow with blessing?

Formal profession of faith: the public act of declaring the surrender of one's life to Jesus Christ. This act includes three dimensions: the declaration of surrender, the affirmation of the Reformed tradition, and the assumption of full membership in the church. These three dimensions can be part of the one act, or, if the professor is too young, be separated into distinct acts.

Questions: How are we inviting baptized ones to take this step? How do we discern when to combine the three dimensions and when to separate them?

Communion: the public sacramental commemoration of Christ's death.

Questions: How do we prepare the community to participate so that faith is formed? How do we wisely celebrate the sacrament intergenerationally and missionally?

CONGREGATIONAL FAITH FORMATION WORKSHEET

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1. A dream -- based on today's seminar, one dream I can imagine working towards implementation in our congregation within the next year is:

2. A workable and meaningful implementation date for this dream is:
3. In light of our current context, this dream seems wise for this time in our history because:
4. The following stakeholders would need to be involved in discussion, education, decision-making, discernment during the process of working towards this dream:

Stakeholders

The nature of the involvement

5. Specific obstacles, anxieties or other barriers that we might encounter include:
6. Some ways to proactively address these include:
7. Other “notes to self” that are important to remember during this planning process: